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Philip O'Brien 2019

Spatial imaginaries and institutional change in planning: the case of the Mersey Belt in north-west England

Abstract

One outcome of the increasing spatial sophistication in research on regions is a growing interest in how spatial imaginaries are institutionalised in processes of region-building. This article proceeds from the observation that the Mersey Belt spatial imaginary, in north-west England, exhibits an outstanding degree of durability as compared to other spatial imaginaries in the region. It is hypothesised that the Mersey Belt has come to function as an informal planning institution with which subsequent spatial imaginaries are compelled to engage. In order to test this hypothesis, Neuman's lifecycle theory of institutional change is adapted to examine a spatial imaginary as a planning institution, analysing the relationship between the Mersey Belt and subsequent spatial imaginaries produced in the region. The article in this way adds to existing theories on the institutionalisation of spatial imaginaries. Based on the findings, it is suggested that the Mersey Belt has become embedded within the region's planning culture, such that shifts in the spatial conception of the region based on new economic imaginaries have been expressed through the spatial imaginary of the Mersey Belt.

Keywords: Spatial imaginaries, planning concepts, institutionalism, planning cultures, regional planning, the Mersey Belt

1. Introduction

Attendant to the resurgent interest in space and place that accompanied the revival of strategic spatial planning in Europe (Albrechts, Healey, & Kunzmann, 2003; Davoudi & Strange, 2009)

was a proliferation of spatial imaginaries and spatial visions that render policy metaphors and alternative urban futures in visual form (Dühr, 2004; Jensen & Richardson, 2003; Kunzmann, 1996). The use of spatial imaginaries in plan and strategy-making connect the city as experienced to the city as imagined in a way that is strategic and concrete, achieved by means of investments, policy programmes and planning regulations (Healey, 2007, p.202).

In this way spatial imaginaries contribute to, and are enacted as part of, the formal institutions of planning. This association is made visible by the fact that much of the aforementioned proliferation of spatial imaginaries emanated from the regional and city-regional strategic planning institutions that were created throughout Europe as part of the 'spatial turn' in planning during the 1990s. Yet spatial imaginaries can also be effective in managing urban change by functioning as institutions in themselves. Institutions can be defined as 'systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interactions' (Hodgson, 2006, p.2). They can be formal government agencies or informal devices that structure actor behaviour, such as conventions and social norms. Spatial imaginaries, while generally produced by the former, can also exist in themselves as the latter.

From an institutionalist perspective, within the arena of planning there simultaneously operates: planning as an activity institutionalised into state and market; formal institutions of planning law and planning systems; planning organisations (which are commonly labelled as public institutions); and informal institutions such as values, conventions and shared conceptualisations. Each form of institution within planning is subject to change over time through a combination of institutional design and institutional evolution (Buitelaar et al, 2007), with interrelationships present between different institutions and different forms of institution (Neuman, 2012).

This article investigates the relationship between spatial imaginaries and long-term processes of institutional change by exploring how spatial imaginaries can function as planning institutions. This is achieved through a case study of the Mersey Belt in north-west England, a spatial imaginary of four decades' standing that lies between the cities of Liverpool and Manchester, and that has resurfaced on several occasions since its original formulation. The Mersey Belt is distinctive in its durability, but also in its adaptability, the same space having been modified to serve different ends.

The Mersey Belt, so-called for its being based around the basin of the River Mersey, has featured in spatial strategies in north-west England since the mid-1970s, maintaining the same fundamental form yet being adjusted to serve the ends of different strategies over that time. In recent years, the Mersey Belt has featured prominently in the literature on soft spaces. The Mersey Belt has been discussed as the partial basis for the construction of 'estuarial city-regional spaces' (Haughton & Allmendinger, 2015), as the spatial backcloth for multiple, sometimes overlapping, attempts at sub-regional soft space creation (Deas, Haughton, & Hincks, 2014), and as a soft space whose durability has impacted upon subsequent soft space creation (Hincks, Deas, & Haughton, 2017). Hincks et al (2017, p.654) discuss the legacy of what they term 'soft spatial imaginaries' in region-building, using the Mersey Belt to outline how soft spaces exercise persistence through shared buy-in among actor networks in planning and economic development whose 'identity, loyalty, and belonging ... proved surprisingly durable given the turbulent policy changes that had been experienced'. This insight points to the tenacity of the Mersey Belt against a background of regional institutional instability.

The Mersey Belt has also featured in research on institutional change in planning. In this respect Dembski (2015) postulates that planners use visual and rhetorical devices such as spatial imaginaries, iconic architecture, and festivals – which he collectively terms 'symbolic markers' – to build new discourses and foment institutional change. Dembski (2015) uses the

Atlantic Gateway – a recent iteration of the Mersey Belt – to argue that spatial imaginaries can be interpreted as triggering disruptive moments in institutional change. This article also addresses the role of the Mersey Belt in institution-building and institutional change, considering how it has performed a disruptive role in these processes, as per Dembski (2015), and how actor alliances and strategic calculation have been used to promote preferred spatial imaginaries, as per Hincks et al (2017). Adding to these existing analyses, the article asks how the Mersey Belt has consistently figured in the long-term process of institutional change in the region, proposing that its role has been that of an informal planning institution. In order to answer this question, Neuman's (2010, 2012) lifecycle theory of institutional change is used as a theoretical framework.

Neuman's (2010, 2012) theory links institutional change to planning images, setting out how the stages in an institution's existence, from its creation to its demise, are connected to the image that is fundamental to the institution. Using a case study of the evolution of planning institutions in the city-region of Madrid throughout the 20th century, Neuman (2010, 2012) maps phases of institutional development against variables that connect institutional change to institutional imagery. In doing this Neuman applies a theory of institutional change that accounts for the strength of the relationship between institutions and images: 'the interrelationship of the image and the [institutional] lifecycle reveals their dual nature: images sustain institutions and project them into larger society; at the same time, institutions maintain and project their constituting image' (Neuman, 2012, p. 144). Neuman's (1996, p.310) observation that 'the coordinating role of the image becomes more important as metropolitan planning and governance become more fragmented' is especially apt in the English regions, where strategic planning institutions have been created and abolished at regular intervals (Common Futures Network, 2017). The durability and long-term influence of the Mersey Belt is emblematic of the coordinating role Neuman attributes to the image.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 explores how spatial imaginaries and planning imagery more generally have been incorporated into accounts of institutional change in planning. Section 3 outlines Neuman's (2012) lifecycle theory of institutional change and how it is applied here in the analysis of the Mersey Belt. Section 4 analyses the lifecycle of the Mersey Belt using Neuman's lifecycle theory of institutional change, emphasising its evolution and its relationship with other spatial imaginaries. Finally, section 5 concludes that the Mersey Belt's combination of durability and adaptability has embedded it within the planning culture of the region, and offers the wider lesson that spatial imaginaries aiming to stimulate disruptive change might achieve this by adapting existing spatial imaginaries that constitute stable frames of meaning.

2. Spatial imaginaries and institutional change in planning

Spatial imaginaries are selective readings of space that visually express decisions over which elements of the map to accentuate, which to understate, which borders to maintain, and which to ignore (Jessop, 2012; Murdoch, 2006). Their use serves to illustrate a highly selective interpretation of geography or a desired end point of social relations in space (Watkins, 2014). Jessop (2012) regards the essential functions performed by spatial imaginaries as identifying, privileging, and stabilising certain spatial elements and activities, underlining their role in the achievement of spatial strategies.

The term 'spatial imaginary' has entered the terminology of planning from human geography (Hage, 1996), but spatial imaginaries are often policy spaces, closely linked to planning frameworks. Spatial imaginaries are therefore related to cognate terms from within planning of 'spatial vision', 'spatial concept' and 'planning concept'. The term 'soft space', while used primarily in reference to spatial governance, also addresses the broader notion of non-standard

spatial formations as mechanisms for ordering social reality (Hincks et al, 2017). Planning concepts are socially constructed formations that serve policy aims based on spatial organisation (Healey, 2004; Kunzmann, 1996; van Duinan, 2013), and that can become embedded within a planning culture (Faludi, 2005), interpreted here as the ‘local milieu that supports planning activities’ (Neuman, 2007: 157).

Spatial imaginaries can thus enter into spatial strategies and planning concepts, through a process of either or both of institutionalisation or cultural embedding. In the case of institutionalisation, the speculative nature of the spatial imaginary solidifies into planning practice, entering its everyday routines in the form of plans, policies and regulations. Where spatial imaginaries become culturally embedded, they influence the ways in which planning is comprehended and enacted (Friedmann, 2005). The distinction between institutionalisation and cultural embedding is especially pertinent in research on planning culture at the local and regional scales, where there is a focus on the artefacts of planning, such as regional development strategies and planning instruments – which both enter into the routines of the institutional apparatus and guide broader conceptions of development – as vehicles for the transmission of a local planning culture (Othengrafen & Reimer, 2013; Valler & Phelps, 2018).

Researchers have drawn on approaches from sociological institutionalism to explain how spatial imaginaries have entered formal plans and strategies. Varró (2014) applies Jessop, Brenner, & Jones’ (2008) multidimensional framework of spatial concepts – which accounts for territory, place, scale and network (TPSN) – to an analysis of cross-border spatial imaginaries, arguing that institutionalisation takes place according to an evolutionary process of variation, selection and retention of forms of spatial organisation that are constantly reproduced through planning and spatial governance practices. According to this thesis, the extent to which spatial imaginaries gain purchase depends on how they fit within existing institutional power relations and actor networks, their integration into spatio-institutional

orders and technologies of government, and their articulation into widely accepted understandings of socio-spatial relations. The more sites within which spatial imaginaries are retained, the greater the potential for their institutionalisation, their long-term influence on emerging spatial strategies, and their integration into a relatively stable TPSN configuration.

Dembski and Salet (2010) emphasise the ability of spatial imaginaries to engender disruptive moments in institutional change, following Thelen's (2004) understanding of institutional development as a path dependent process interrupted by critical junctures. The authors situate this proposition within the mismatch between planning institutions and urban change. Planning institutions are predisposed to the replication of the 20th century city and are maladapted to the challenges of contemporary urban form, characterised by its extensiveness and polycentricity (Dembski, 2015; Healey, 2007, 2015). At the same time, contemporary urban regions are prone to contestation regarding the location of land-use allocations and investments, a propensity that is reflected in spatial imaginaries and new governance spaces. Spatial imaginaries therefore constitute disruptive moments that combat institutional stasis by proposing alternatives that challenge existing institutional meaning (Dembski, 2015, p.1650). But these disruptions cannot occur through the production of the spatial imaginary alone. Rather, they depend upon the interaction of the spatial imaginary with the existing institutional setup and on how well the spatial imaginary has been embedded within existing institutions. Therefore, in both the evolutionary model put forward by Varró (2014) and the disruptive model described by Dembski and Salet (2010) the successful institutionalisation of spatial imaginaries is contingent upon the present and past institutional setup with which they engage.

The process by which discourses such as spatial imaginaries become institutionalised is described in sociological institutionalism as one in which agents are conditioned by frames of meaning. Hajer (1993) applies this in policy analysis to explain how discourses can be used to frame issues by highlighting particular aspects while downplaying others, an explanation that

is analogous to the understanding of spatial imaginaries as selective readings of space (Murdoch, 2006; Jessop, 2012). According to Hajer (1993, p.48), a discourse can be said to be dominant where its discourse coalition (the group of actors who share that discourse) dominates the discursive space (by persuading political actors of its superiority over competing discourses), and where that domination is observable in institutional practices. Healey (2007, p.22) applies this logic to spatial strategy-making initiatives, noting that they are able to generate framing concepts or policy discourses that can transcend the institutional site of their formulation to influence institutional practices with material consequences for resource allocation and land-use regulation.

How such policy discourses are framed is crucial in determining their institutionalisation, but also has consequences for their continuing influence once institutionalised. Healey (2007, p.191) uses the example of the green belt as applied in Britain to illustrate how policy ideas, presented as discourses lacking in flexibility, can, if they successfully achieve acceptance in policy and practice, ‘over-stabilise’ policy that subsequently struggles to respond to changing conditions. By contrast, where discourses are sufficiently flexible they may prove to be more adaptable to both institutionalisation and to changing conditions faced once institutionalised. Metzger and Schmitt (2012, p.273), in investigating the formalisation of the Baltic Sea Region, distinguish between ‘degrees of institutional fixity’ and ‘properties of durability’. The authors apply Allmendinger and Haughton’s (2009) concept of soft space, arguing that the malleable characteristics of soft spaces, whose ‘fuzzy boundaries’ are deliberately ill-defined, lend them a durability that may be lacking in more formalised spaces. Metzger and Schmitt (2012) conclude that non-standard spaces, as articulated in their case in the form of a soft space, may represent a contingent stage in the process by which policy spaces are formed and, ultimately, formalised. Yet the authors also emphasise that the formalisation of such spaces is neither

functionally determined nor irreversible, and therefore the process of space formation is potentially without end.

This broadening of the concept of soft space to include those spaces that are ‘largely prefigurative, attempting to create a critique or propose an agenda’ prior to any attempt at formal institutionalisation in frameworks of governance is sustained by Hincks et al (2017, p.644). Soft spaces are, in this conceptual development, detached from their primarily governance-related concerns and aligned with work on spatial imaginaries, leading the authors to coin the term ‘soft spatial imaginaries’. This alignment is demonstrated by the analytical concern of Hincks et al (2017) to investigate the rationales used by advocates of particular spatial imaginaries with the aim of securing traction in the governance arena, for which they use north-west England as a case study. Emergent from this investigation is that multiple spatial imaginaries, produced over the course of several decades, each have their own underlying premise but also embody a relationship with past spatial imaginaries.

In the analysis of Hincks et al (2017, p.646) the role of the Mersey Belt as the backdrop to these multiple successive attempts at space formation is contingent rather than causal, with the relationship between sequential spaces being based on shared personnel and lessons learned from previous initiatives. But an alternative proposition, offered here, is that the Mersey Belt is neither a contingent backdrop to successive spatial imaginaries, nor a particular spatial imaginary that was succeeded by others. Instead, it is hypothesised that the original spatial imaginary of the Mersey Belt has come to play the role of an informal planning institution that subsequent spatial imaginaries are bound to take into account.

3. Analysing spatial imaginaries as planning institutions: adapting Neuman’s lifecycle theory of institutional change

This article takes the Mersey Belt, interpreted as the space between Liverpool and Manchester first formulated in the Strategic Plan for the North West (SPNW) (North West Joint Planning Team, 1974) and which has strongly influenced subsequent spatial imaginaries in the region, as its object of analysis. The Mersey Belt is understood here as a spatial imaginary that has come to function as an informal planning institution that has performed a prominent role in regional planning in north-west England for more than four decades. Neuman's (2012) lifecycle theory is a theoretical framework with which to analyse the long-term process of change undergone by a planning institution as it relates to the imagery associated with it. Neuman (2012) investigates institutional change in the Madrid metropolitan region over the course of the 20th century, using four separate planning episodes in which the lifecycle of a planning institution is mapped against the image of the city depicted in plans and strategies. Neuman's analysis takes the image of the city or city-region as the independent variable and the institution as the dependent variable, mapping the type of change undergone by the institution against changes to the image (table 1).

Type of change	Stimulus for change	Change to constituting image	Outcome of change
Creation	Dissatisfaction with status quo	New image	New institution
Evolution: incremental change	No stimulus, or stimulus to maintain or improve slightly	Maintain existing image stability	Stability within existing societal frame
Reform: major change	Internal or external recognition that major conditions are changing, thus institution must too	New image coexists and / or competes with existing image, and may replace it	Stability-preserving change within new societal conditions, or instability (unintended result)
Decline / destructuring	Internal disregard / external threat	Decline of faith in existing image	Atrophy / decline
Demise	External threat / internal disregard	No image, loss of image	Extinction

Table 1: Neuman's lifecycle theory of institutional transformation. Source: Neuman (2012).

This article adapts Neuman's theory to investigate the lifecycle of the image *as* institution. Accordingly, the Mersey Belt is interpreted as a spatial imaginary that functions as a planning institution which has strongly influenced subsequent spatial imaginaries produced in the region. The Mersey Belt is thus the independent variable, and the series of spatial imaginaries subsequent to it the dependent variable, with intervening variables including national policy aims and formal regional institutional architecture. The rationale behind this approach is the observation that the Mersey Belt appears to have performed a role different from that of other spatial conceptions of the region, being distinguished by its longevity and its prevalence across multiple institutional sites. The use of Neuman's theory in this way enables us to analyse the role of the spatial imaginary in institutional change in the long-term, opening up insights into how spatial imaginaries can adapt and change as institutions in themselves, while also effecting change in the planning institutions to which they are related.

In the following section, the institutional development of the Mersey Belt is related, using Neuman's (2012) lifecycle theory of institutional change to structure the process of development. The section is divided into sub-sections covering Neuman's five stages of institutional development: creation; evolution – incremental change; reform – major change; decline / deconstructing; and demise. The section draws on a review of published and unpublished documents from throughout the time period covered that relate to the Mersey Belt, as well as 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with planning and economic development actors in the region.

4. The lifecycle of the Mersey Belt

The following subsections summarise the lifecycle of the Mersey Belt as a spatial imaginary that functions as a planning institution. Table 2 summarises these subsections, mapping against

Neuman's (2012) five stages of institutional development: the regional strategies in which spatial imaginaries in north-west England have featured; whether these spatial imaginaries are based on the original conception of the Mersey Belt in the SPNW or they are departures from it; the nature of these spatial imaginaries; and their effect on the Mersey Belt as a planning institution.

Type of change	Regional strategy featuring spatial imaginary		Nature of spatial imaginary featured	Outcome for the Mersey Belt spatial imaginary as a planning institution
Creation	Strategic Plan for the North West (1974)		Foundational Mersey Belt image	Mersey Belt spatial imaginary is over time institutionalised
Evolution: incremental change	Greener Growth (1993)		New image continues the strategy embodied in the SPNW's image	Further embedding of the Mersey Belt spatial imaginary
	Regional Planning Guidance (1996)			
	Regional Planning Guidance (2003)			
Reform: major change	Regional Strategy (1999)	Economic	New growth focused versions of the Mersey Belt compete with RPG version	Mersey Belt is rendered unstable
	Atlantic Gateway (2010)			
Decline / destructuring	Regional Spatial Strategy (2006)		Mersey Belt loses favour to rival concept of city-regions and, to a lesser extent, polycentric conceptions of the region	Mersey Belt no longer has a firm place in the region's institutional framework
	Single Regional Strategy draft (2010)			
Demise	Northern (2014)	Powerhouse	City-regions remain the dominant spatial imaginary, with polycentric conceptions present in the background	The future of the Mersey Belt is as yet unclear

Table 2: The lifecycle of the Mersey Belt as a planning institution. Source: partly derived from Neuman (2012).

4.1 Creation

Geddes' (1915) conurbation of 'Lancaston' is the earliest designation of the Liverpool-Manchester geography as a coherent urban area, which is viewed as the product of the agglomeration and coalescing of settlements in south Lancashire to form 'another Greater

London ... a city-region of which Liverpool is the sea-port and Manchester the market' (Geddes, 1915, p.12-13). But the SPNW of 1974, written as one of a series of regional strategies intended to provide a strategic regional context for the preparation of plans at county and local scales (Wannop & Cherry, 1994), is the earliest reference to the Mersey Belt in regional planning documents. The strategy used is one of a concentration of growth within the urbanised area between Liverpool and Manchester, on the basis that the environmental and quality of life issues in the region's urban core required urgent attention. The background to this was a general expectation of continuing population and employment growth, albeit at lower levels than the pattern set post-war, and an expectation that planning aims could be achieved by controlling the spatial allocation of that growth.

While regional policy is framed around objective criteria, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, the Mersey Belt is a response framed around spatial structure. It uses a spatial imaginary to generate an interpretation of urban-regional change that is not forthcoming from a reading of objective criteria alone. (For a discussion of the use of spatial visions in relation to the EU Cohesion Policy, see Zonneveld & Waterhout, 2005).

Yet without a regional planning agency to apply the Mersey Belt within planning practice, its implementation lay with the local and county authorities. This disjuncture, to be repeated in later episodes of regional planning in England, was seen by contemporary commentators as being influential upon the formulation of the Mersey Belt. The urban concentration strategy that the Mersey Belt embodies was characterised as an attempt to broker political compromise in preference to the politically riskier strategy of building on the region's assets and opportunities outside of the major cities (Senior, 1974).

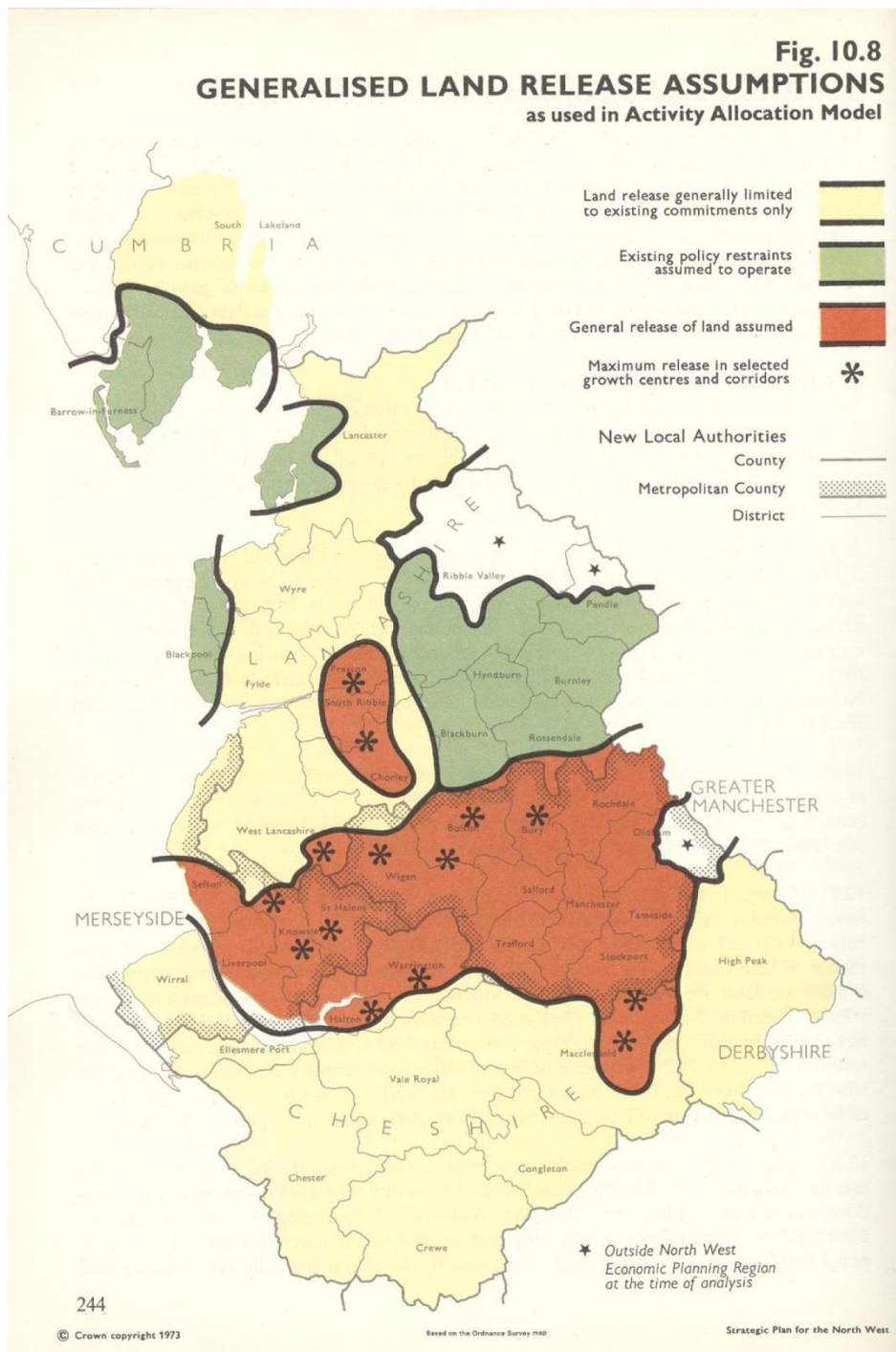


Figure 1: Diagram illustrating general land release assumptions in the Strategic Plan for the North West. Source: North West Joint Planning Team (1974).

4.2 Evolution, incremental change

The Mersey Belt's focus on existing urban areas rather than on urban expansion, while novel at the time of the SPNW's publication in 1974, no longer contradicted national policy by the late 1970s, by which time the pattern of inner urban decline called attention to in the SPNW had entered the national consciousness and the New Towns Programme had been curtailed. Yet the implementation of the Mersey Belt appeared likely to be stymied by the lack of regional institutional architecture. While there was briefly a regional association of county and metropolitan councils in the latter 1970s, this was short-lived, and its demise signalled a prolonged abeyance in regional planning in the north-west that would not fully end until the late-1990s (Wannop, 1995).

During the intervening period, interest in the Mersey Belt was sustained by the ongoing concern of planning professionals in the region and found expression in the production by the RTPI north-west branch of *North West 2010: The Pressing Case for Strategic Planning* (RTPI, 1990). In making the case for a revival of regional planning, *North West 2010* drew attention to the SPNW, both in its being the most recent, and by now severely out of date, regional strategy, and in its formulation of the Mersey Belt. It is noted that the Mersey Belt strategy had effectively been implemented by the local authorities – in spite of there being differences of opinion over land release and in the absence of a regional planning tier – due to there being 'striking agreement about the basic principle' of urban containment within it (RTPI, 1990, p.12).

In the same year government proposed the creation of Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) that would inform local authority plan-making, produced by the Government Office for the North West (GONW), regarded as central government's representatives in the region (Pearce &

Ayres, 2007). A recently formed voluntary grouping of local authorities at the regional scale, the North West Regional Association, produced advice for RPG in the form of Greener Growth: Draft Advice on Regional Planning Guidance (North West Regional Association, 1993). North West 2010, Greener Growth ..., and the first iteration of RPG (GONW, 1996) established the long-term endorsement of the Mersey Belt.

This was partly due to the loyalty of planners, in whose concept of the region the image had been sustained, a factor magnified by the degree of overlap in the authorship of those documents.

‘The regional concept as it was emerged from the local government officers charged with writing the first stage of RPG ... except that that team of officers charged with writing RPG was almost identical to the team of professionals who had, in their spare time, sat down and written the RTPI’s North West 2010 document.’ (Interview, NWDA Senior Officer 1.)

Also important is that its strategy of urban concentration was an easy one for the local authorities to implement, eliminating the need for them to identify sites for urban expansion and thereby satisfying both urban and rural areas. Thus, by virtue of population decline between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, and the shift in the mood of local authorities from expansionism to contraction, the SPNW’s urban concentration strategy had travelled full circle from ambitious growth redistribution to conservative compromise.

Two new regional institutions were launched by the then Labour government in 1999: the North West Development Agency (NWDA) and the North West Regional Chamber, which later transitioned into the North West Regional Assembly (NWRA) and assumed responsibility for preparing RPG. The NWDA, whose purpose was to stimulate economic change at the regional scale (DETR, 1997), began preparation of the Regional Economic Strategy (NWDA,

2000), while the NWRA began a review of RPG. The 2003 adopted RPG maintained the approach of the SPNW, concentrating development into the 'North West Metropolitan Area' (ODPM, 2003, p.23), and offering a visual representation of this in its key diagram. This represents the first time since the SPNW that the image of the Mersey Belt was drawn, the stimulus for this being that planners in the region had remained loyal to the image and had, after three decades, reproduced it at the first opportunity to do so, once this was presented by the revival of regional planning.

The outcome of this phase in the lifecycle of the Mersey Belt is of a further embedding of the image in the consciousness and practices of planners in the region and the stabilisation of the policy ramifications that stem from the image. Of the intervening variables, the creation of new regional planning and economic development institutions was crucial in reviving the Mersey Belt spatial imaginary, while the conservatism of the local authorities and of national housing and planning policy with regard to land release at the urban fringe was consistent with its strategy of urban concentration.

4.3 Reform, major change

In their preparation of the new regional strategies, both the NWRA and the NWDA breathed new life into the Mersey Belt. The local authority-led, land-use planning-focused, NWRA had done so in a way that prioritised continuity and a shared commitment to the principles of spatial organisation, as well as the fundamental shape, of the Mersey Belt. But the NWDA, whose remit lay in the promotion of economic activity in the region and whose private sector board contrasted with the local councillor-led NWRA, took a different approach.

The NWDA's analysis of the spatial implications of growth in the north-west had identified the same pattern of development in the southern section of the Mersey Belt and decline in the northern section as had existed as long ago as the preparation of the SPNW. This contrast formed the basis of a spatial development strategy with distinct aims for the northern and southern sections, now respectively labelled the 'Metropolitan Axis' and the 'Southern Crescent', expressed visually in an adjusted Mersey Belt spatial imaginary in the 2000 RES. While the Metropolitan Axis was to be addressed by the same urban regeneration policies as had been proposed in the SPNW and had survived in regional planning documents since then, the Southern Crescent was identified as a zone of competitive potential which could be capitalised on by the new regional institutions. Beyond the RES, the NWDA presented its bifurcated Mersey Belt in its submissions to the examination in public of the 2000 draft RPG, lobbying unsuccessfully for a greater emphasis on growth.

The NWDA's reinterpretation of the Mersey Belt reflected a culture distinct from land-use planning and its associated conservative tendencies. An interviewee with long-term experience in the north-west, and who was involved in the preparation of both Greener Growth ... and the first RES, highlighted the difference in attitudes between the NWDA and the NWRA:

'I think if you look at the first RES, that was in a sense an indicative regional spatial strategy because it did have spatial planning concepts in it, but once you bring in the statutory land-use planning brigade, then that becomes very difficult to do, because it brings in development land-use rights. It also brings in local government councillors. I remember writing Greener Growth ... it was quite a short document and we hadn't put a plan in it that would set out the spatial concepts and I remember an officers' meeting in which somebody said 'you shouldn't put a plan in it; the

members will understand what we're saying and there'll be an enormous argument and we'll never get it through'. (Interview, former NWDA Senior Officer 1.)

The conflicting approaches to the Mersey Belt were reflected in the relationship between the NWDA and the NWRA during their early years. A number of interviewees pointed to personality clashes among senior staff, in addition to differences in mentality between an organisation whose primary responsibility was statutory land-use planning and another whose spatial development exercises were firmly couched in economic geography. Contrasting

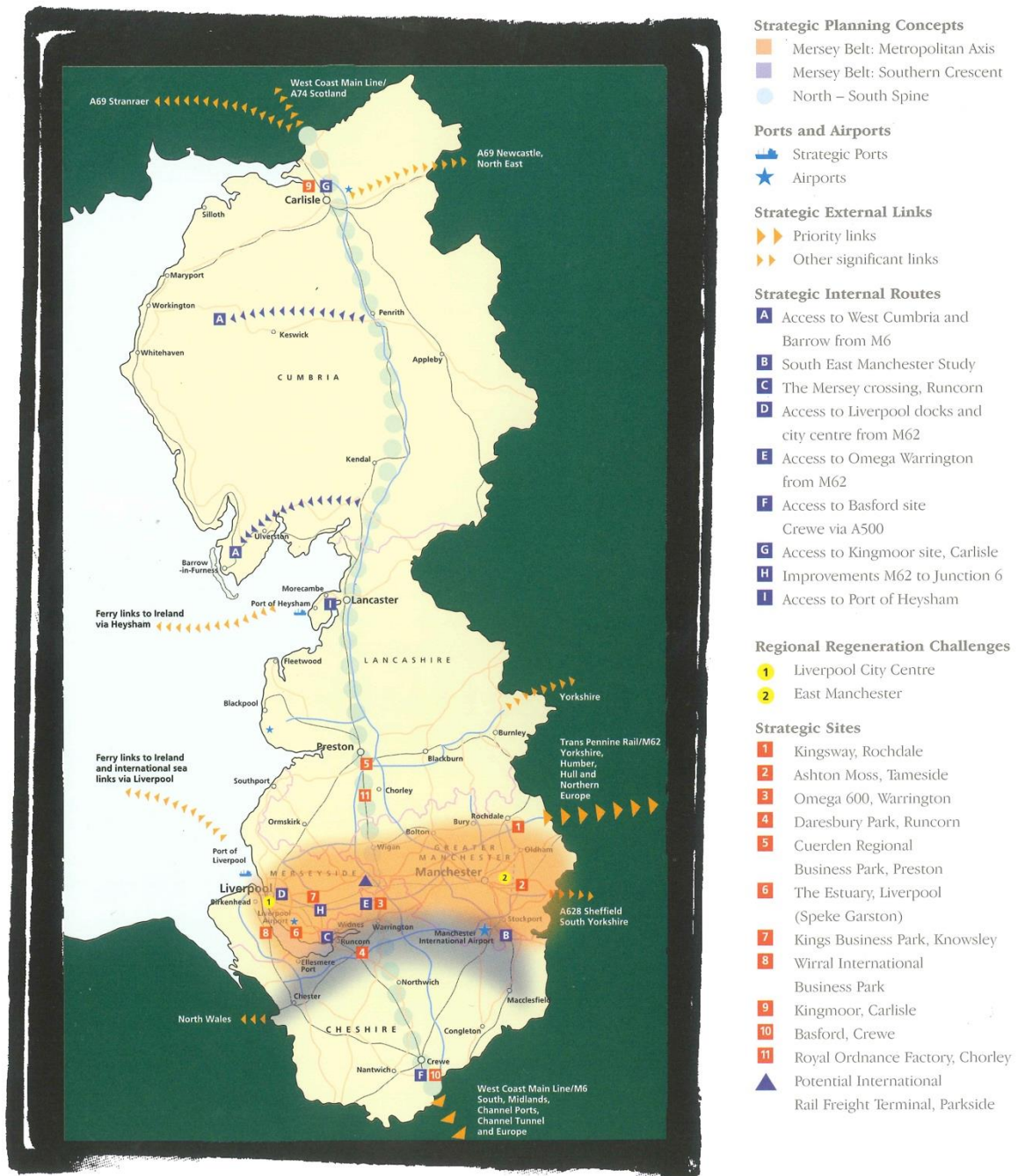


Figure 2: The 'Metropolitan Axis' and 'Southern Crescent', illustrated in the 2000 North West Regional Economic Strategy. Source: NWDA (2000).

working practices are also evident, as demonstrated by the NWRA's frustration with the NWDA's attitude to the dissemination of its research and policy documents.

‘The RDA was not very keen to publish things, so there was tension there, because to use something in an [examination in public] it’s got to be in the public domain. It was hard to get things out in public and to get copies of things, which was partly down to the personalities right at the highest level.’ (Interview, former NWRA Senior Officer 1.)

During this period the Mersey Belt was characterised by instability, as the NWDA’s growth-focused interpretation vied with the NWRA’s version, which remained loyal to the image’s original formulation. The consequence of this inter-institutional engagement, which took place against a background of changing external conditions in theories of economic geography and in national government policy (O’Brien, Sykes & Shaw, 2017), was volatility and an uncertain future for the Mersey Belt, following a period of stability.

4.4 Decline / deconstructing

The theory and policy agenda behind a more accepting view of uneven development that had supported the NWDA’s growth-focused Mersey Belt spatial imaginary also underpinned the movement towards city-regions that took hold in the UK during the mid-2000s. During this period a series of policies were issued to strengthen cooperation between local authorities at the city-regional scale (Harding, Marvin & Robson, 2006; Harrison, 2012).

While the second RES, published in 2003, was a brief document entirely lacking in spatial content, the third RES, published in 2006, shifted its spatial development framework towards that of a regional space constructed from component city-regions, with only very limited reference made to the Mersey Belt. The Regional Spatial Strategy, prepared by the NWRA as the successor document to RPG and published in 2008, also shifted its spatial configuration of

the region to focus on city-regions, making no mention whatsoever of the Mersey Belt. Thus, while in 2000 the NWDA's bifurcated Mersey Belt spatial imaginary was too divisive to be accepted by the NWRA, by 2008 opinion had altered across the regional institutions such that city-regions were being empowered as drivers of growth within regions (Harrison, 2012; Ward & Jonas, 2004), in contradiction of the spatial redistribution aims of the 2003 RPG. Yet there were contemporary conceptions of the region that, like city-regions, moved away from the Mersey Belt spatial imaginary, but unlike city-regions, offered a more experimental view of the north-west.

The first of these arose from within central government, whose intention to manage growth in the south of England had identified growth areas in the vicinity of London. Pressure within government to formulate a corresponding growth strategy for the north of England led to the Northern Way, an only vaguely articulated strategy that aligned the northern cities in the shape of a growth corridor (ODPM, 2004). The concept was subsequently taken up by the three northern Regional Development Agencies who, in partnership with the Regional Assemblies and other stakeholders, rearticulated it as a spatial strategy based on an interconnected network of the northern city-regions. The ambitious concept of the Northern Way ultimately petered out, however, lacking a firm institutional base in the absence of a singular governance institution for the north of England.

The second arose within the NWDA. By the time of the transition from the separate RSS and RES to a Single Regional Strategy (SRS), to be prepared in partnership by the regional institutions, the NWDA's position on the spatial configuration of the North West had further evolved. Discussion at the NWDA during the early stages of preparation of the SRS – at which point the government's intentions were to align the economic, environmental, and social objectives of the region within a single strategy to be written by the RDAs (HM Treasury, Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, & Communities and Local

Government, 2007) – focused on the potential to generate agglomeration externalities by improving transport links between the main urban centres of the region (NWDA, 2007, 2008).

‘We were quite clear that there was an important spatial triangle, with Liverpool, Preston and Manchester, and it covered north Cheshire as well. We were clear that this spatial area made sense, whether you called it the Mersey Belt, the Atlantic Gateway, what have you.’ (Interview, former NWDA Senior Officer 2.)

The essence of the NWDA’s approach determined that the region’s greatest asset is the opportunity it offers to build scale – seen as vital in fomenting the agglomeration-led growth identified as crucial to the region’s future – through a strategy of investment in a regional core shaped around a triangle of Manchester, Liverpool and Preston (NWDA, 2007). The notion of a polycentric region and of the agglomeration benefits that could be accessed via improved connectivity – in terms of knowledge networks and spillovers, access to large labour markets, the presence of professional service providers and specialist innovation advice – built up in the collective thinking of the NWDA (NWDA, 2008).

The city-regional focus evident in the 2006 RES and the 2008 RSS, the Northern Way initiative, and the NWDA’s preparation for SRS, challenged the dominance of the east-west Mersey Belt concept by demonstrating a prevalent interest in network forms of spatial organisation, with key diagrams presenting a region made up of transport corridors connecting city-regional nodes (Harrison, 2012). The 2006 (draft) RSS key diagram affords equal prominence to the north-south transport axis as it does to the east-west Mersey Belt. While the Mersey Belt has historically garnered much greater attention than the north-south axis, the city-regional focus was seen by interviewees within the NWRA as having usurped the Mersey Belt sufficiently as to mean that Liverpool and Manchester were interpreted primarily as nodes

within a wider regional network in which the Mersey Belt was one of two major transport corridors.

Yet the growth-oriented Mersey Belt originally favoured by the NWDA was to resurface in the late 2000s. Peel Holdings Ltd, a private company specialising in land holdings, development and logistics, had drawn on the Mersey Belt as a means to incorporate its land and property investments, including Liverpool's container terminal and airport as well as the Manchester Ship Canal, into a framework for spatial development. Peel's strategy was an attempt to raise the profile of its assets by inserting them into the spatial imaginary of the Mersey Belt, reshaped around Peel's investments and relabelled as Ocean Gateway (Peel, 2009). In a curious confluence of strategic and personal interests, as personnel from Peel and the NWDA travelled in opposite directions, the NWDA took ownership of Ocean Gateway, relabelling it as the Atlantic Gateway Strategy (NWDA, 2010). (For a detailed account of the gestation of the Atlantic Gateway Strategy, see Harrison, 2014.)

Ultimately, the notion of a polycentric north-west region did not gain sufficient traction within the NWDA as to be rendered in published form, and strategic concerns were drawn back to the Mersey Belt by Peel's intervention. The Atlantic Gateway was presented as one of the strategic options in the SRS consultation document, though the local authority response to it was negative (NWDA, 2010a). While opposition to the Mersey Belt focus and to the Atlantic Gateway concept was largely due to a drawing away of resources from across the region towards a specific area, also important was the difficulty of identifying with the geographical concept. This was especially true in the light of the traction that had been achieved by city-regions, which had by that point accrued a great deal of buy-in.

'The concept of city-regions emerged as a stronger concept, cities looking out into their hinterland, and everybody saying how does this [Mersey] belt really work?

It's actually centred around Liverpool and Manchester as nodes, with Warrington as a node in the middle of it.' (Interview, former NWRA senior officer 2.)

During this period the Mersey Belt was largely cast aside in favour of alternative spatial imaginaries. These were primarily city-regions but also the more ambitious polycentric notions of the Northern Way and the NWDA's triangular urban formation drawn around Manchester, Liverpool and Preston. The Mersey Belt did undergo a limited revival, however, as the NWDA reverted to a growth-focused version, now allied to the private sector Peel strategy. In spite of the controversy generated by the Atlantic Gateway (ExUrbe, 2013), however, it ultimately generated more heat than light. The period can be characterised overall by a decline in interest in the Mersey Belt, whose status was damaged by the external threat of the city-region concept and by the internal disregard of the NWRA and the local authorities. The Atlantic Gateway appears in this analysis as a replaying of the growth-focused Mersey Belt of the first RES, overlapping temporally with the rival city-region spatial imaginary but conceptually akin to the previous planning episode.

4.5 Demise

The incoming 2010 coalition government's rejection of the regional scale and continuation of the previous government's interest in the city-regional scale has shifted the sub-national governance debate firmly from the region to the city-region for the foreseeable future (Morphet & Permberton, 2013). Meanwhile, planning is seen as a policy area in retreat (Lord & Tewdwr-Jones, 2014), with strategic planning especially lacking in government favour (Common Futures Network, 2017). The Northern Powerhouse initiative offers an alternative perspective by renewing the rationale of the Northern Way and the NWDA's polycentric conceptions in

promoting urban-regional agglomeration (HM Treasury, 2014). Yet the aims and governance of the Northern Powerhouse remain uncertain, several years after its formulation (Lee, 2017).

Between the publication of the SPNW in 1973 and the mid-1990s, the Mersey Belt was not formally implemented, nor did it receive mention in regional planning documents, though its strategy of growth concentration was informally enacted by the local authorities of the region. Throughout this protracted hiatus, the region lacked either formal or strong informal regional institutions, while the revival of the Mersey Belt in the 1990s emanated from the reconstruction of a regional institutional apparatus. The present lack of interest in the Mersey Belt may then be adequately explained by the corresponding absence of regional planning and governance institutions. That the history of regional planning in England is characterised by instability, combined with the fact that some level of interest in the Mersey Belt continues, in the shape of the Atlantic Gateway, together with tentative commitment towards engagement and cooperation between the Liverpool and Manchester city-regions (Liverpool City Region, n.d.), suggest that the Mersey Belt is by no means on the verge of demise. Indeed, the fortunes of the image to date have fluctuated according to the vicissitudes of regional planning in England, such that a regional revival along the lines of the one experienced in the 2000s might well signal a resurgence of interest in the Mersey Belt.

5. Conclusions

This article addressed the process by which spatial imaginaries become institutionalised, using the case of the Mersey Belt, a spatial imaginary whose existence spans more than four decades, to enable the adoption of a long-term perspective on institutional change. Previous work on the institutionalisation of spatial imaginaries and spatial concepts in planning has drawn the common conclusion that this process is contingent upon the present and past institutional

architecture within the region, with which new spatial imaginaries must engage (Boudreau, 2007; Dembski & Salet, 2010; Healey, 2004; Varró, 2014). Hincks et al (2017, p.654), addressing the Mersey Belt, point specifically to the role played by ‘identity, loyalty and belonging’ among actors in ensuring the ongoing influence of spatial imaginaries. This article goes further in suggesting that the Mersey Belt is a foundational spatial imaginary that has become embedded within the regional planning culture, in this way influencing conceptions of regional spatial development such that subsequent spatial imaginaries are compelled to take it into account. Thus, the Mersey Belt, as a spatial imaginary, represents a part of the regional planning culture with which new spatial imaginaries must engage before they can be institutionalised in plans and strategies.

Emergent from the analysis are two key observations. Firstly, the extent of actor and institutional support lent to the Mersey Belt, such that it has endured in the collective planning imagination of the region even through those extended periods during which regional planning was weak or absent. Second, the degree of influence that the Mersey Belt has had on subsequent spatial imaginaries in the region. This has occurred such that where changes to the spatial conception of the region have arisen, as with the shift from spatial balance to spatially concentrated growth, the economic imaginaries that underlie these shifts have been expressed through the spatial imaginary of the Mersey Belt. In this way the Mersey Belt has maintained the same underlying spatial definition while accommodating a mutation of content and purpose that accords with changes in political economy and in the composition of actors supporting it. Where new spatial imaginaries have been developed that cannot be expressed through the Mersey Belt, such as city-regions, these have had to contend with contemporary interpretations of the Mersey Belt, as occurred during the co-existence of the city-regional interpretation of the region with the Atlantic Gateway initiative.

The mixture of actor consensus and adaptability that underpin the Mersey Belt's durability have conferred on it a status and role different from those of other spatial imaginaries in the region, such that it figures as a constant in regional planning, where other spatial imaginaries come and go. The same is true of certain spatial imaginaries extant at the national scale, such as the green belt in Britain and the Randstad in the Netherlands. It is thus argued that the Mersey Belt's enduring presence in the collective regional planning imagination is such that it has entered the regional planning culture of north-west England. This follows Faludi's (2005, p.452) argument for the inclusion of the 'products of planning' – its shared conceptualisations and their representations – to be included in the notion of planning culture. In this sense the green belt can be said to be a part of British planning culture and the Randstad a part of Dutch planning culture.

While it can be said that the Mersey Belt has been institutionalised into regional strategies, thereby being taken account of in land-use plan preparation, its more powerful role has been enacted from within the regional planning culture. From there it has structured the dialogue of regional planning in north-west England, conveying an image that demands a response from planning actors and thereby outlasting conventional means of planning based on political authority and investment (Neuman, 2007). But where the green belt has proved to be overly rigid, hampering the ability of policy to adapt to changing conditions (Healey, 2007), the Mersey Belt has conferred stability while proving adaptable to changing interests. The durability and adaptability of the Mersey Belt are attributable to its institutional form as an informal structuring device for strategic planning thought within the region.

The longevity of established spatial imaginaries is reinforced by the political difficulties associated with dislodging firmly embedded, or 'locked-in', spatial imaginaries (Healey, 2007). Because new spatial imaginaries are disruptive, the cost of change can in some instances lead to a reversion to the status quo. The creation of new spatial imaginaries that are based on

existing, embedded concepts may be a response to this. This investigation tells us that spatial imaginaries that aim to foment institutional change may be more effective where they are able to adapt existing spatial imaginaries that have themselves reified into elements of planning culture, establishing a frame of meaning that conditions the response of policy actors. Thus, policy actors may be persuadable where strategies aiming at disruptive transformation can bring in change using the Trojan Horse of a stable frame of meaning.

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